

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Dear Dr. Ary S. Graça Filho:

I write to draw your attention to a recent decision by authorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran to bar Iranian women from several volleyball matches in Tehran organized under the auspices of the International Federation of Volleyball (FIVB). The matches in question were part of the FIVB's World League competitions in May and June 2014. Prior to a game on June 13 at Tehran's Azadi Sports Complex, in which Iran hosted Brazil, Iranian authorities announced that they would not permit any Iranian women to enter the stadium as spectators, nor would they permit Iranian women journalists to attend to report on the matches to be played in Tehran. The official ban prevented only the presence of Iranian women; Iranian authorities allowed women of other nationalities who had traveled to Iran support other national teams to enter the stadium and attend the matches played there.

The Iranian authorities' decision to bar Iranian women from attending the matches was taken under a policy that Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs is reported to have adopted in 2012. The official rationale underpinning this policy, it appears, is a concern that the environment within sports complexes is both unsuitable and unsafe for women because of the rude or lewd behavior of men, and that women should be protected from exposure to this environment. National police chief Esmaeil Ahmadi Moghadam has stated that in the view of the authorities it was "not yet in the public interest" to allow women and men to mix in sports stadiums. In practice, the authorities' action barring Iranian women from the FIVB games forms part of a larger official policy aimed at imposing greater gender segregation in public and other spaces.

The Iranian authorities have maintained a ban on women attending football matches since the 1980s.

The Iranian authorities' ban on Iranian women attending volleyball and football matches has often met with public protest in Iran. On June 20, 2014, Ghoncheh Ghavami, an Iranian-British dual citizen, joined several other female and male demonstrators outside the Azadi Sports Complex in Tehran, to protest their exclusion from a match between the Iranian national volleyball team and Italy. Iman Ghavami, Ghoncheh's brother, told Human Rights Watch that several police officers in plainclothes arrested his sister and several of the other protesters and used violence against them. According to the brother of Ghoncheh Ghavami, the plainclothes police officers slapped her and dragged her along the ground before loading her and others into a van and taking them to the Vozara Detention Facility in Tehran, releasing them several hours later.

According to reports, authorities re-arrested his sister when she returned to the detention facility on June 30 to collect personal belongings that the authorities had previously confiscated from her. Officials then took her back to her home, from which they removed her laptop and other belongings, and then took her to Tehran's Evin Prison, where she currently remains in detention. Authorities have subjected Ghoncheh Ghavami to prolonged periods of solitary confinement, denied her access to her family and lawyer, and have reportedly charged her with "propaganda against the state." On September 22, a spokesperson for Iran's judiciary denied that Ghavami's arrest and detention had any connection with her protest against her exclusion from a sporting event but failed to offer any other explanation or provide further details.

We have been informed that a group of Iranian activists wrote to you to express concern following the Ghavami's initial arrest together with other protesters, and to request the FIVB's assistance in addressing the serious issues that this matter raises.

In light of the foregoing, Human Rights Watch would like to ask the following questions:

- 1) What procedures, if any, are in place to allow the FIVB to raise concerns regarding violations of the principle of non-discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion or other similar criteria, by member states or federations such as the Iranian Volleyball Federation?
- 2) Has the FIVB raised concerns regarding Iran's continuing policy of banning women from watching volleyball matches with Iranian authorities or the Iranian Volleyball Federation? If so, when were these concerns raised and with which Iranian authorities or entities, and what was the nature of the concerns? If the FIVB has not raised any concerns, does it now plan to do so, or if not, why not?

- 3) Has the FIVB raised concerns regarding the arrest and ongoing detention of Ghoncheh Ghavami, and others arrested along with her on June 20 when protesting against the ban on women spectators at the volleyball match inside the Azadi Sports Complex? If so, when were these concerns raised, what was the nature of the concerns, and with what Iranian authorities or entities did the FIVB raise them? If the FIVB has not raised any concerns, does it now plan to do so, or if not, why not?
- 4) What action, if any, does the FIVB plan to take to address the Islamic Republic of Iran's egregious violation of the principle of non-discrimination in relation to sporting fixtures arranged as part of its membership within the FIVB?

To Human Rights Watch's knowledge there are currently no provisions in the FIVB's constitution and regulations that promote a culture of non-discrimination among national federations and nations that host FIVB tournaments, both in the selection of athletes and treatment of nationals. We request that the FIVB seriously consider including such language, or find other means to ensure the FIVB will not, in the future, authorize games in venues where the entry policy or national laws violate the principle of non-discrimination on gender and other prohibited grounds.

We further note that earlier this month, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) confirmed that future host city contracts will include an antidiscrimination requirement. The antidiscrimination clause will be added to section L of the host city contract's [preamble](#) and informed the committees of the three finalists bidding for the 2022 Winter Games: Almaty (Kazakhstan), Beijing (China) and Oslo (Norway). Human Rights Watch has [called](#) on organizers of other international sporting events to take immediate steps to include a nondiscrimination clause in their host city contracts.

Finally, we urge the FIVB to communicate their concern to the Iranian government, either directly or through the Iranian Volleyball Federation, that the arrest and continuing detention of Ghoncheh Ghavami and others on the basis of their protesting Iranian laws and regulations banning women from volleyball games is unacceptable.

We thank you for your attention to these matters and look forward to receiving a response by close of business on Monday, October 6, 2014.

Sincerely,



Sarah Leah Whitson
Executive Director

Middle East and North Africa Division
Human Rights Watch